Work-Life Strategies on the Move: Reconfiguring Boundaries

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Abstract. This short paper proposes some reflections emerging from an interview study examining the challenges of how highly mobile people (in terms of both spatial mobility and of practices) manage the blurring and/or separation of work and life activities. The goal was to document and reflect upon how strategies for managing work/life demands are varied, and how people appropriate technologies in highly personal and nuanced ways to support these personal strategies. Initial findings indicate that, while different people put in place often diametrically opposite strategies to handle work and life demands, all participants invested a substantial amount of time in devising a strategy and in fitting a technological infrastructure to it, and that revisions to these strategies are seldom put in place and often coincide with major events in one's life.

1 Introduction

"(…) As digital technologies and the challenges of their adoption, usage and appropriation pervade our lives, they become a constant and fluid presence in people's everyday practices, rather than tools used merely in specific work versus non-work situations" (Grönvall et al., 2016). In a recent special issue (Grönvall et al., 2016), several authors contributed studies of how digital technologies are employed and appropriated fluidly and seamlessly for work and non-work, in parallel to an increasingly complex set of personal strategies for managing different spheres of life. Here we talk about "nomadic practices" referring to the fluidity and constant reconfiguration of time, space and tasks. The fluid

reconfiguration of work and life boundaries is also essential part of this: in an increasingly mobilised culture of work, the rhetoric of work-life balance is often contrasted in reality by constantly shifting boundaries between work and personal lives.

While several studies highlighted how strategies for managing work/life demands are varied, and how people appropriate technologies in highly personal and nuanced ways to support them, technology design is still too often relying on either the limited "always-on" paradigm, or on the assumption that a separation of work and life is always the ideal management strategy. Also the technological perspective often ignores the complex nature of "work" and "life", whereby "work" is not limited to the office/workplace (e.g. work done in people's homes), and being in the workplace does not eliminate the need to attend to personal demands (e.g. managing personal issues during work hours); similarly "life" demands are not just about family, social or leisure activities (e.g. taxes; healthcare), as well as private time being pervaded with work tasks as expectations change in terms of availability (Grönvall et al., 2016)..

In studying the "mobilization" of practices as well as of infrastructures, however, we need to understand how such mobilisation of work life strategies and boundaries is accomplished, rather than focus on the "interruption" or "distraction" that life demands put on work (Grönvall et al., 2016). Furthermore, we move a critique to the rhetoric that people seek to balance their work and their personal lives, seeing it as both desirable and effective. Bødker argues that constantly reconstituting boundaries is essential to human activities, and that technology design should recognise this rather than capitalise on presumed boundaries that do not remain fixed or do not persist in practice (Bødker, 2016).

Furthermore, boundary drawing is reconstituted by redefining work and non-work, whereby models of labour and forms of unpaid activity also evolve and shift (Gray et al., 2017).

With the goal of shedding light on how such balancing/blurring strategies are indeed developed and accomplished, we conducted an interview study aimed at documenting and reflecting upon how strategies for managing work/life demands are varied in the context of highly mobile lives, and how people appropriate technologies in highly personal and nuanced ways to support these personal strategies and lifestyles.

2 The Interview Study

We recruited interview participants through networking forums, mailing lists and social media in the Sheffield area. We gathered a sample of 26 people of working age (over 18) in knowledge-intensive roles in high employment sectors in Sheffield (education, IT, creative industries, design and engineering). 12 participants were women and 14 were men. At least 8 participants were in the 33-

40 age category. The youngest participant was 24 and the oldest 62. Occupations included: Education/training consultant, Business Development Manager, Senior Producer, CEO, Information Officer, Strategic Development Manager, Knowledge Transfer Researcher, Designer, Librarian, and Lecturer.

The interviews were semi-structured. Participants were asked questions about themselves (educational background, professional role, etc.), the work that they do and how they accomplish it, some aspects of their private life and about how they deal with the challenges and demands of work and life. They were also asked about their use of digital technology for managing their time and multiple demands. The interviews were audio-recorded and lasted between 40 and 90 minutes. The study captured a set of lived practices around work, life and the role of technology and the interviews provided detailed insights of the participants' perceptions, decisions and strategies. All of the interview audio recordings were revisited by the researchers and annotated with reflections and comments. While the thematic analysis of the data is still ongoing, we have identified an initial set of main themes, as well as a number of examples of different and variously fluid work-life practices.

2.1 Individual Strategies

Example 1 - Distinct separation
Sally, 33-40, Married with no children; Information Officer.
Sally purposively devised a clear plan to separate her work and home life - and she does this because she believes that it makes her more productive at work because she's not distracted, and that at home she can truly switch off.

> I'm the kinda person who thinks all of the time, and if I see work stuff coming in at home I'm gonna get stressed by that. I need a switch off period. To support that so I don't go completely nuts I enforce that rule…It's a habit I've developed over the years and I suspect if I encroached upon it I've never be able to get it back again (Sally).

Example 2 - Blurring all the way
Nathan, 33-40, Married with two young children; Industrial Designer.
Nathan keeps "standard" office hours (9am to 5pm), but finds himself working on evenings and weekends in order to deliver projects. His wife has similar work demands, and they take turns to look after the children when one of them has a project to deliver.

> If both parents work from Monday to Friday, the weekends are really squeezed for all the stuff you should do during the week. Sometimes the children get sort of pushed to one side so that we can get on with jobs, and sometimes they get the monopoly of the weekend (...) At the moment it can't always be joyous weekend, it's a balance of getting the practicalities done as the same time as looking after them (Nathan).

Nathan embraces the blurring as both a way to use idle time at home (for example in the evenings when his kids are asleep) and to maintain his design reputation, which is an important concern for him.

Example 3 - Three Roles
Greta, 26-32, Married, one child; Education consultant / Lecturer / PhD Candidate.
Greta has six email accounts linked to her private life and to the different aspects of her three roles:

> I've got to admit I prefer emails to calls even though they take longer because you've got a record of what's been discussed.…I find that I deal with so many different people with different hats on I can't remember what I've said always - without that record…But also you can control the variables a bit in email and you can control when you reply and reply when it suits you, and before you answer it you can scroll back and find out what you want to ask and I like the control it gives me (Greta).

Example 4 - Working during idle time
Brian, 26-32, Single, no children; Researcher and PhD Candidate.
Brian says he doesn't necessarily class what other people would class as work. Work emails aren't really classed as work to him - they are just responded to in what he terms **"*idle" time*.**

For Brian "dead" moments - when commuting for instance - are times when he accesses online content and responds to some emails…

> "Dead time - empty time - something where you can't necessarily get away from doing - there's no social or work value to be there……whilst you are waiting for your lentils to cook…" (Brian).

Example 5- Career and Family
Andrew, 33-40, Married with one 2-year-old child and another on the way at the time of the interview; Sales Director.
Andrew works very hard, however he still makes sure to dedicate time to his young family in the evenings when he gets home after office hours. He has made his career a priority at this time, so he has no hobbies to speak of.

> I have a young family so inevitably as soon as I get home I can't do any work at all because of my young family. When he's gone to bed, maybe I can look at things a bit more. I almost always start working before I leave home. So I do some things first thing when I wake up, I catch up on things, take stock of whatever's happened so that when I arrive in the office I am more prepared for it (Andrew).

Andrew feels that in the future he might use the flexibility that his work affords him, not in order to work less but in order to work differently:

> The thing that makes me consider differently is the pressure that there is on me at work, and a continual inability to get everything done that needs to be done and in order to reduce stress levels it could be useful to be able to get things done outside of the office, particularly with another baby on the way and how that impacts on my time...I might want to be in the office

less but get more work done. It's definitely something that I continually look at. It isn't necessarily perfect at the moment (Andrew).

These examples show how varied and complex individual approaches to handling work and life and be. In our ongoing analysis of the data, we see multi-faceted, and often diametrically opposite strategies of complete blurring vs. complete separation, and also cases where the boundaries are not so neatly defined, and almost always intentionally so. Interestingly, these individual strategies also relate to different styles of work, which are shaped by both individual preference and by organisational and sector opportunities/constraints and expectations.

2.2 Nomadic Cultures in Organisations

To echo the theme of the workshop, the interviews provide interesting insights on how different organisations and individuals seem to develop a "nomadic culture" as well as a "culture of fluidity", and how particularly expectations and demands by an organisation interplay with personal choices and preferences.

For example, one participant working in the creative sector acknowledged that there in an expectation both for high mobility of time and of resources and high blurring between work and life. Participants in academia see high flexibility as both an opportunity and a constraint, allowing them to shape their own way of working but also making it difficult to establish boundaries and their exact nature. One participant working in the high-tech industry reported that in his company highly mobile work is expected, including long distance mobility, however if a partner is involved (for example attending the same conference) the perception of the employee doing work remotely changes completely and is questioned.

The personal motivation to work is also a factor. Passion for work is mentioned by many as the reason for adopting a blurring strategy. Some people who admit to loving their jobs don't really see doing work at home as a problem or a chore. However there are two examples of participants who love their job but still don't want to do it at home. Passion is definitely a factor but might not work the same way for everybody.

Our data indicates that a nomadic culture of flexibility also characterises non-work activities: time and resources dedicated to hobbies and other non-work activities are also mobilised, and so are the strategies for handling these activities in place. This is often necessary as some of the participants engage in non-work activities that require advanced skills, organisational know-how and extensive coordination. They tend to these activities flexibly, and often allow them to infiltrate work time. For some of the participants, work has certain boundaries, but these passions have not, and technology enables them to keep up with their passions.

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While our analysis of the data is still ongoing, we begin seeing interesting articulation of constraints, opportunities and expectations.

Certainly, many of the participants "work" to devise a strategy and a set of tools that suit them. Sometimes it has taken them many years to develop a system that works for them. Most participants don't want to change these strategies without considerable reason to do so, no matter how "balanced" or "blurred" they are.

3 Acknowledgements

4 References

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